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Stigma, Shame and the Experience of Poverty in Japan and the United Kingdom

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Whilst stigma and shame are central features of the experience of poverty in capitalist societies, we know relatively little about crucial aspects of these phenomena, particularly how these experiences differ according to variety of capitalist formation. This article draws on the available empirical literature to examine these relational aspects of poverty in two very different societies, the UK and Japan. Through comparing these literatures, we are able to comment on the ways in which stigma is manifest in differing social, personal and institutional contexts and, therefore, is internalised as shame in similar and divergent forms in these respective societies. We note the very different social values and forms of welfare that constitute these societies which are at times responsible for contrasting experiences of shame, yet conclude that stigma and shame perform important functions within capitalist societies as a means to legitimate the continued existence of poverty within these social systems, and are therefore universal phenomena.

Keywords: Stigma, shame, poverty, social exclusion.

Introduction

This article focuses on the interrelationship between two central features of the experience of poverty: stigma and shame. The centrality of shame and stigma to understandings of poverty is an enduring theme both in historical accounts of poverty and in contemporary poverty research. As far back as Adam Smith's early observations, poverty has been associated with an inability to observe customary norms relating to dress, tastes and styles of living and has been explicitly framed in terms of avoiding social disgrace and opprobrium (Smith, 1776: 351–2). Similarly, an enforced inability to avoid public shaming plays a central role in Amartya Sen's understanding of the 'absolutist core' of poverty (Sen, 1983, 1993). Whilst the commodities required to avoid the stigma of poverty vary across time and place, direct experiences of indignity, shame and humiliation have always featured strongly in accounts of the experience of poverty in both rich and poor countries (e.g. Beresford *et al.*, 1999; Narayan *et al.*, 2000; Narayan and Patel, 2000; Ridge, 2007).

However, whilst this understanding of poverty as a social relationship is deeply embedded (and contributes substantially to the moral case for tackling poverty), poverty research has for the most part focused more narrowly on the experience of poverty as a material condition. Nevertheless, as Lister (2003) powerfully argues, poverty also needs to be understood as a potentially damaging social relationship characterised by processes of othering in which the 'poor' are discursively marginalised from 'mainstream' society. In the process, the problem of poverty is reconfigured as a problem of the 'poor' themselves, rather than arising as a product of social relations characterised by inequalities of wealth and power. Experiences of stigma and shame are central to this process of othering and as such serve to regulate relationships between 'the poor' and the wider society, including daily social interactions, wider social representations of poverty and 'the poor' in everyday social exchanges, and public and media discourses on poverty.

In this article, we seek to explore the social-psychological impacts of poverty in two very different societies: the United Kingdom, as an individualist society, compared to Japan's collectivist form. By drawing on a review of the qualitative evidence on poverty in these countries, we seek to provide a comparative account of the experiences of stigma and shame and how these relate to wider cultural differences, and social settings. We begin from a *prima facie* position that the contrasting features of these societies serve to mediate the relationship between poverty, stigma and shame, thus resulting in divergent 'national' experiences. In Japan, welfare policy places considerable emphasis on Confucian ideals of 'familial piety and loyalty', stressing the importance of reciprocal kinship obligations that foreground the family, alongside corporations, as the principal agents of welfare, restricting state provision to strictly means tested benefits and services (Esping-Andersen, 1999). In the UK, poverty is very much viewed as the failure of the individual, therefore policy tends to emphasise personal rather than collective forms of responsibility. As Walker *et al.* (2013) note, distinctions between more collectivist cultures (such as Japan) which promote interdependent concepts of self may differ in key respects from more individualistic cultures (such as the UK) where the self is viewed as radically independent. One might expect the internalisation of stigma to be more pronounced in collectivist societies than in more individualistic ones. Whilst we accept that these are somewhat stylised descriptors, hypothecated societal characteristics provide a useful lens to explore the literature presented in the article, from which we may develop more concrete analysis of the points of divergence and commonality in the experiences of stigma and shame.

Understanding stigma and shame

Before discussing the findings of our review it is important to frame the parameters of our analysis. We begin by outlining what we mean by stigma and shame. For Goffman, the term stigma refers to 'an attribute that is deeply discrediting' in which the subject is 'reduced in our minds from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one' (1963: 12–13). Stigma is therefore a central feature of the experience of poverty (Beresford *et al.*, 1999) which reflects the wider ideological construction of poverty and its causes in which 'the poor' are constructed as a passive 'burden' on society and as undeserving of state assistance (Reutter *et al.*, 2009). Thus, stigma reflects an 'external' process through which the social 'contribution' or 'value' of those on low incomes is actively denigrated by the pejorative labels that are attached to specific aspects of life on a low income. Shame, then,

refers to the internalisation of stigmatising social labels that force an individual to view themselves 'negatively through the eyes of others' (Scheff, 2011). In the context of poverty, those living on low incomes evaluate their own situations through an aetiological lens of personal failure constructed by dominant political and social discourses. We view shame as a broad notion encompassing a host of negative emotions, such as embarrassment, guilt, humiliation, low self-esteem, disgrace (Scheff, 2011), resulting from this process of self-critique. Given the range of emotions captured by the notion of shame, it is necessary to understand shame as a continuum, whereby feelings vary in both intensity and duration, from transient weaker forms, such as embarrassment, to durable stronger forms, such as humiliation and disgrace (Scheff, 2011). Whilst there is a tendency within the literature to conflate and merge the notions of stigma and shame, we endeavour to uphold these distinctions in the presentation of research findings.

Reaching a comprehensive understanding of these emotions within the context of two very different societies is a complex task, which requires a measure of reflexivity to temper the claims that result from our analysis. We wish then to add the following caveats. First, we have attempted, as far as is possible, to capture the nuance of language in both societies. However, direct comparison of such culturally laden terms is fraught with difficulties, which means that reaching definitive conclusions are beyond the scope of this review. We are restricted then to identifying similarities and divergence in the experience of shame and stigma and to suggest tentative reasons for these findings. Second, we present findings supportive of the hypothesis that stigma and shame are central features of poverty in these societies, which reflects the empirical studies reviewed. The counterfactual, instances where stigma or shame are not evident, feature rarely in the literature; where it is reported it is reflected in our discussion, particularly where shame is either successfully deflected or replaced by more positive emotions, such as pride. A more significant limitation, particularly in relation to shame, is that the literature is largely based on semi-structured 'one-off' interviews that provide a snapshot of peoples' lives, and this means that it is difficult to capture the 'ebb and flow' of human emotions and the events that influence such emotional peaks and troughs, which could be better captured through longitudinal design. Thus, there may well be points in participant's lives where shame may not be a significant factor, and then those times when these feelings intensify, yet these dynamics remain largely unreported, lending a rather static quality to our understanding. Third, on the basis of our review it is apparent that the qualitative literature relating to the lived experience of poverty is more extensively developed in the UK than Japan, therefore our findings must be couched within a greater degree of uncertainty than normal to reflect the gaps in the Japanese literature that do not allow stronger comparisons and conclusions to be drawn. We may speculate that this could be because stigma and shame play a greater role within this society, making the topic a greater taboo to research.

Before detailing the findings of the review, it is necessary to briefly outline our study design. The findings of this article are based on a semi-systematic review of qualitative research with low income households in Japan and the UK, published in the period 1990 to 2013. Initially, searches were conducted of the social science databases¹ and e-searches of relevant journal databases before more targeted search strategies were developed to supplement the studies initially identified (citation tracking, expert review). Studies were then assessed according to their quality and relevance, a process guided by principles adapted from the UK Cabinet Office Rapid Evidence Assessment framework (Spencer

et al., 2003). Aside from studies failing to address stigma or shame, most commonly studies were omitted due to insufficient methodological detail provided. A thematic narrative analysis was then conducted of the fifty-one empirical studies included in the review.

The stigma of poverty

As a result of the pervasive 'povertyism' (Killeen, 2008) evident in dominant discursive constructions of 'the poor', there are many aspects of the experience of poverty in the UK that can be deeply stigmatising. Drawing upon Baumberg *et al.*'s (2012) distinction between social, personal and institutional level stigmas, these might include the social hostility associated with benefit receipt, individual level stigma arising from an enforced inability to buy things taken for granted by others or being unable to effectively perform roles or to participate in the 'normal' activities as dictated by the societies in which we live, and the institutionalised stigma attached to the receipt of particular benefits or services. For example, Cohen *et al.* (1992) observe that participants reported feelings of stigma as a result of their daily interactions, as well as the experience of accessing benefits and services, due to the suspicion they felt surrounded them. Moreover, Hooper *et al.* (2007) identify several sources of stigma in the accounts of low income households, although these do not always solely relate to low income, and some participants faced multiple forms of stigma relating to personal histories of institutional care, mental health problems or alcohol/drug dependency (see also Conolly, 2008; Reutter *et al.*, 2009; Ridge and Millar, 2000).

In Japan also, Nishio (1994) suggests that stigma is also associated with the receipt of public assistance (*Seikatsu Hogo*). Means testing under the *Seikatsu Hogo* system differs crucially to UK means testing, insofar as it asserts the legal responsibility of the family through assessing whether relatives have the capacity to support members in need. Thus, benefit receipt becomes not just the shame of the individual recipient but the family that failed to support them. It is also clear that receipt of public assistance more specifically is stigmatised as disreputable, and associated with approbations of laziness, with such views stemming from a traditional work ethic that regards poverty to be the result of a lack of personal effort (for example, Kudomi, 1993; Nishio, 1994). Similarly, in Japan service users report feelings of stigma related to receipt of social care services, including community psychiatric care, or from experiencing welfare assessment processes that can serve to reaffirm feelings of personal worthlessness and low esteem (for example, Okabe, 1990; Tanuma, 1993; Omatsu, 2008; Iwata, 2008). More broadly, a good deal of the Japanese literature explores deep exclusion by focusing on issues such as homelessness (Miyashita, 2001; Nishizawa, 2005; Ikuta, 2007) and severe multiple disadvantage (Yuasa and Nihei, 2007; Omatsu, 2008) and this needs to be recognised when attempting to draw comparisons.

A recurring theme within the UK literature documents the centrality of public acceptance and the perceived need to conform to social norms in shaping self-perception and self-esteem, and, in turn, the assault on personal dignity which arises when command over resources is insufficient to meet these social needs. The stigma experienced by children who are not able to 'fit in' with peers as a result of low income is well documented, for example when their families cannot afford the kinds of clothing, footwear or other personal effects enjoyed by their peers (Daly and Leonard, 2002;

Ridge, 2002; Elliott and Leonard, 2004; Green, 2007; Walker *et al.*, 2008). Hooper *et al.* (2007) demonstrate parents' acute awareness of the social pressures on their children to 'fit in', and how these pressures appear to be especially pronounced for low income families living in affluent areas.

On the whole, less emphasis seems to be placed on the material aspects of social acceptance and inter-personal exclusion within the Japanese literature. Nevertheless, Konishi (2003) documents the stigma reported by young people living in single parent households arising from an inability to afford items widely available to their peers. Similarly, Tanaka (2004) and Nishida (2011) document experiences of discrimination and exclusion, including peer bullying and unfavourable treatment by professionals experienced by children and young people living in care facilities (*JidoYogoShisetsu*). Indeed, traditional Japanese societal values, including negative attitudes to divorce and lone motherhood, appear to intensify these experiences with especially detrimental impacts on personal well-being (Uzuhashi, 1999; Tanaka, 2004; Nishida, 2011; Uchida, 2011).

Stigma may also be attached to the community or neighbourhood where you live or originate from. A consequence of living in deeply disadvantaged areas is the negative perceptions of such communities by outsiders, which further marginalises and excludes (Lupton, 2003: 210; Hooper *et al.*, 2007). Research by The Young Foundation documents the effects of area stigma and their consequences for residents' self-perceptions which were likened to being 'told you are rubbish' (Watts *et al.*, 2009: 171). Participants in Lupton's (2003) study discussed the harmful impact of these processes on access to opportunities, as well as their corrosive effects on people's self-perceptions and confidence, particularly when moving beyond the security of their own communities. In Japan, Kudomi's (1993) study of public housing highlights how similar processes of stigma can result in the exclusion and isolation of vulnerable groups in certain areas. Likewise, the divorced, disabled people, and people in receipt of public welfare may be subjected to prejudices and isolated by hostile feelings in their community (Ozawa, 1993). Similarly, in highly stigmatised 'outcast' communities (*Buraku*) where state assistance is limited, the informal economy and networks within these communities provide important low-skilled jobs for young people. However, as Uchida (2008) suggests, these community-based networks appear to limit their educational and occupational aspirations.

Shame and the Internalisation of stigma

Whilst an under-researched field, recent evidence (for example, Chase and Walker, 2012; Walker *et al.*, 2013) suggests that the internalisation of stigma as shame by people experiencing poverty is a universal response to impoverishment, although the specific forms that this takes may reflect differences of national culture. From the UK studies reviewed here, it would appear that the nature and intensity of shame is also influenced by a range of social factors, including age, ethnicity and gender. Studies that have explored ethnic identities demonstrate how cultural values can intensify feelings of shame when individuals are either unable to discharge expectations as dictated by their beliefs (for example charitable giving, remittances), or when individuals are made to feel 'like a beggar' due to a complex interaction of religious doctrine and treatment by social security staff (Cohen *et al.*, 1992; Chouhan *et al.*, 2011). Moreover, some participants experienced feelings of guilt or embarrassment rather than describing themselves as feeling shamed

(Mckendrick *et al.*, 2003). Several UK studies also highlight the ways in which people experiencing poverty sometimes perceive themselves to be a burden on family and friends, thus evoking feelings of guilt (Hill *et al.*, 2007; Fahmy and Pemberton, 2008). For example, older people interviewed in Hill *et al.*'s study (2007: 14) took care not to become a burden on family members 'who had their own lives to lead', and as a result were reluctant to ask for help and were eager to be seen to reciprocate through provision of, for example, childcare. Few Japanese studies have focused explicitly on this issue, but the limited evidence suggests the experience of poverty is associated with feeling belittled, losing social respectability and with personal resignation and disappointment (Nishio, 1994; Yamada, 2010).

Feelings of guilt and shame often arise when people are unable to perform socially prescribed roles, such as gendered or parenting roles. Thus, in Hooper *et al.*'s (2007: 21) UK study, unemployed men demonstrated a greater sense of 'failure, guilt and weakness for not fulfilling a provider role than women'. Amongst the worst aspects of poverty for parents is their perceived inability to provide their children with the opportunities and living standards that their peers enjoy, which causes considerable feelings of guilt (Ridge, 2002; Athwal *et al.*, 2011). Similarly in Japan, Uzuhashi (1999) documents lone mothers' concerns regarding anticipated future discrimination for their children as a result of the persistence of traditional societal family values, and Yuki's (2011) male respondents also report anxieties arising from the experience of unemployment and the concomitant loss of gendered identities as worker and provider.

Shame also arises as a consequence of the operation of welfare systems which reinforce the wider social stigma attached to poverty. As a result, many older people refuse to claim the benefits and support to which they are entitled as citizens, deterred by application processes widely viewed as degrading and intrusive, and by administrative systems perceived to be judgemental and oppressive (Hill *et al.*, 2007: 19). However, when such assistance is requested and refused by agencies this can have especially damaging social psychological consequences, with people reporting feeling humiliated by these decisions (Power, 2005). In Japan also, prior experiences of institutional care perceived to be degrading contribute to reluctance in seeking the public support to which citizens are entitled (Miyashita, 2001), and Okabe (1990) reports that caseworkers' negative attitudes to benefit claimants compound feelings of degradation and infringed welfare rights.

It should be noted that some studies have demonstrated that pejorative discourses surrounding welfare receipt are often deployed to deflect feelings of shame and to resist the internalisation process. For some, these discourses can provide a way to distinguish oneself from other claimants deemed to be less 'deserving' (Flaherty, 2008), or as a means of denigrating the perceived 'dependency' and 'laziness' of the unemployed by people in low paid work (Crisp *et al.*, 2009: 17). People experiencing poverty sometimes therefore seek to create distance between themselves and the situations of others perceived to be less 'deserving' (Reutter *et al.*, 2009) by differentiating their circumstances (Okabe, 1990; Iwata, 2007) and, in doing so, seemingly avoiding stronger forms of shame.

Responses to shame

As Goffman (1963) argues, individuals often seek to manage their identities in order to minimise the negative emotions that result from processes of 'othering'. To this extent, people experiencing poverty are active subjects in mitigating feelings of shame associated

with poverty. The literature identifies a variety of responses to manage shame. Firstly, UK research evidence demonstrates how people experiencing poverty may seek to conceal aspects of their circumstances from others (Davidson, 2009). Secondly, withdrawing from social relationships and forms of social participation is one strategy adopted by people experiencing poverty to avoid potentially embarrassing social situations which highlight people's inability to afford to participate in common social rituals (for example, meals out and social drinking). In Japan, several studies document public welfare recipients reluctance to 'show their face in public' (*seken*) due to intense feelings of shame, or because they were afraid of 'welfare-bashing' and consequently they kept a low profile in their daily lives (Okabe, 1990; Nishio, 1994; Iwata, 2000, 2007; Yuki, 2011).

Recent UK evidence suggests that the process by which people experience shame as a result of poverty is closely related to the erosion of self-esteem (Batty and Flint, 2010; Flint, 2010; Bashir *et al.*, 2011). Low self-esteem often arises from the internalisation of negative personal self-critiques based on narratives of personal failure in ways which discount and obscure the structural constraints which shape individual responses to poverty (Flint, 2010; Bashir *et al.*, 2011). As Batty and Flint (2010) demonstrate, the social-psychological impacts of poverty to some extent therefore depend upon whether people adopt individualised or structuralist explanations of their circumstances, with those who managed to minimise the impact of poverty on their self-esteem understanding their situations within a narrative of structural constraint. Thus, Cohen *et al.* (1992: 60–2) find that many participants who had a low sense of self-worth, framed their self perception through the internalisation of social norms of self-reliance and economic independence. Research in Japan similarly finds that many benefit recipients report feelings of self-loathing (Yamada, 2010). Nevertheless, the impacts of impoverishment and straitened financial circumstances on personal self-esteem are complex and cannot always be assumed to be negative. For example, existing research in the UK and Japan highlights the sense of achievement or pride derived from gaining educational qualifications, or completing work-based training courses or in raising children in the face of financial difficulties and material hardship (Yuzawa, 2009; Bashir *et al.*, 2011).

Conclusion

On the basis of a review of qualitative evidence on poverty in Japan and the UK we conclude that stigma is a central feature of the experience of poverty in diverse societies. There are observable similarities in the stigma attached to: the receipt of means tested benefits (for example, Cohen *et al.*, 1992; Nishio, 1994); complex personal histories of multiple disadvantage (see for example, Hooper *et al.*, 2007; Omatsu, 2008); and deprived neighbourhoods (see for example, Kudomi, 1993; Lupton, 2003). It has been proposed that the affective impacts of the internalisation of stigma are reflected in feelings of guilt, embarrassment, humiliation, disrespect, assault on self-esteem, and shame, and that the nature and intensity of these effects reflects the differing social roles, responsibilities and statuses attributed to different populations on the basis of their social and demographic characteristics (for example, age, ethnicity, gender, social class). Thus, the shame produced by an inability to discharge duties associated with gender and parental roles are acutely felt in both societies (see Hooper *et al.*, 2007; Yuki, 2011). This serves to warn against overstating the distinction between collectivist and individualist cultures which may over-simplify the cross-national dynamics of social stigma and its

psycho-social impacts. It might also suggest that shame and stigma are key disciplinary features of all capitalist societies which serve to legitimate the unequal distribution of resources and power by promoting discourses of fecklessness and individual failure in ways which serve to obscure the structural antecedents of poverty and exclusion.

Yet, there remain crucial points of divergence in relation to the nature and distribution of social roles and statuses that reflect wider national differences in culture and lifestyles. On this basis, Walker *et al.* (2013) hypothesise that heightened social pressures to conform and collaborate in collectivist cultures may exacerbate feelings of shame associated with poverty. Certainly, the material reviewed here appears to support the contention that the influence of the work ethic and traditional family values may serve to compound the intensity of experiences of shame in Japanese society. Thus, the stigma that surrounds 'non-traditional' family units, i.e. lone parents, appears to intensify the feelings of shame ordinarily experienced in relation to poverty (Uchida, 2011). Moreover, the social isolation experienced as a result of shame, appears to be more emphatically reported in the Japanese literature (see Iwata, 2000), which may be reflective of the harsh consequences of being excluded from social networks in a collectivist society. Nevertheless, it is also possible that the sense of social solidarity typically held to be characteristic of collectivist societies may serve to mitigate the most corrosive psycho-social impacts of poverty by promoting empathy and heightened social consciousness. The family means test provides an interesting example (Nishio, 1994), as it creates an obligation for families to look after members, and in doing so shame appears to be diffused or distributed through the familial network, rather than in the UK where means testing is very much targeted at individuals or the nuclear family unit, thus concentrating the impacts of shame on these individuals. There is also evidence to suggest that in collectivist society the stigma attached to being unable to afford consumerist items is less pronounced than in the UK, insofar as individuality is less important, whereas in the UK, individuality and the symbol motifs of personal success are premised on the ability to consume and display material wealth, a pressure seemingly acutely felt by parents (see Ridge, 2002).

We recognise the limitations of the evidence presented here in reaching any firm conclusions on these wider issues, not least as a result of the diversity of literatures reviewed in terms of focus and methodologies, and the nuances of social meaning attached to the process of internalisation of stigma in very different societies where direct translations for certain social phenomena often do not exist. Nevertheless, existing research evidence on poverty has to a large extent ignored the relational dimensions of poverty in favour of investigating deprivation of material living conditions. Whilst this is clearly vital, advancing understanding of poverty as a social relationship, including its social-psychological impacts, is also important in documenting the social harms caused by poverty and therefore in mobilising a public consensus to tackle this enduring problem. As the literature reviewed here shows, this is a pressing concern and, arguably, a universal feature of poverty in very diverse national contexts.

Note

1 Searches were conducted in the following databases: GeNii; CiNii; NDL; Web of Knowledge (including Index of Theses, Zetoc, Copac); British Library; ASSIA, IBSS, Social Services Abstracts, OpenSIGLE; Google Scholar. The following search terms were used in a number of combinations: 'hinkon' (poverty), 'shitu-teki' (qualitative), 'raifu hisutori' (life history), 'keiken' (experience of), 'fubyoudo' (inequality), 'sutyuguma' (stigma), 'tei-syotoku' (low income), 'haji' (shame).

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